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AUTHOR Offer, Marcus; Watts, Tony
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ABSTRACT

This report records the main themes of the discussions and recommendations made at a policy consultation on the Connexions Service. Section 1 examines the current use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in relation to relevant forms of personal information, advice, and guidance leading to personal development for young people aged 13-19. It reports that over 150 items of software relevant to career education and guidance (CEG) are currently available; hundreds of websites offer help and advice; and Connexions will be delivered through ICT (among other means) have a website, and issue a CD-ROM. Section 2 explores the issues and creative possibilities in developing the role of ICT as a "tier" within the Connexions Service, including its relationship with face-to-face services for young people. Key issues on service delivery are divided among these topics: access, engaging the users, meeting the demand, targeting the service, levels of service, involving young people, and confidentiality. Section 3 identifies the measures needed to assure the accessibility, impartiality, confidentiality, and quality of technically mediated services within Connexions. These issues are addressed: national or local provision, a new building or "in-fill," quality standards, and ICT and the personal advisor. Twelve recommendations are made. (YLB)

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ED 449 371

The Use of Information and Communication Technologies in the Connexions Service

Report on a NICEC/CRAC/Guidance Council invitational policy consultation held on 20-21 September 2000 at Madingley Hall, Cambridge

in collaboration with the Guidance Council

sponsored by the Department for Education and Employment

the Guidance Council

D/EE
Department for Education and Employment

The new Connexions service provides a major opportunity to rethink the way in which information, advice, guidance and opportunities for personal development are delivered to young people. The creative use of information and communication technologies (ICT) is central to such rethinking. ICT includes all technically mediated interventions, including websites, telephone helplines, CD-ROMs, information kiosks, digital TV and mobile phones. If used effectively, it could greatly enhance the quality, the user-friendliness and the interconnectedness of the Connexions service.

The aims of the consultation were:

- to examine the current use of ICT in relation to relevant forms of personal information, advice and guidance leading to personal development for young people aged 13-19;
- to explore the issues and creative possibilities in developing the role of ICT as a 'tier' within the Connexions service, including its relationship with face-to-face services for young people;
- to identify the measures needed to assure the accessibility, impartiality, confidentiality and quality of technically mediated services within Connexions.

The 28 participants included representatives of DfEE, schools and colleges, careers companies, and some of the Connexions pilot areas, as well as representatives of the BBC and of voluntary and charitable agencies in the fields of drug prevention, youth work, youth justice and work with homeless young people. The consultation was chaired by Rodney Buse, Chair of the Guidance Council.

This report records the main themes of the discussions and the recommendations made. It is written by Marcus Offer (NICEC Fellow) and Tony Watts (NICEC Director). It does not necessarily represent the views of the consultation sponsors, or of any particular individual at the event.

NICEC

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling is a network organisation sponsored by CRAC. It conducts applied research and development work related to guidance in educational institutions and in work and community settings. Its aim is to develop theory, inform policy and enhance practice through staff development, organisation development, curriculum development, consultancy and research.

CRAC

The Careers Research and Advisory Centre is a registered educational charity and independent development agency founded in 1964. Its education and training programmes, publications and sponsored projects provide links between the worlds of education and employment.

Sheraton House, Castle Park,
Cambridge CB3 0AX
Tel: 01223-460277 Fax: 01223-311708
E-mail: enquiries@crac.org.uk

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THE CONTEXT

Current provision

- Over 150 items of software are currently available and relevant to careers education and guidance. A selection is available to young people in most schools and careers centres throughout the country. Many offer gateways and jumping-off points to the World Wide Web.
- Hundreds of websites, maintained by careers services, youth services, governmental organisations, learning providers, voluntary and community bodies and the media, offer help and advice on a wide range of issues that interest young people in the 13-19 age group. By 2002 all schools and libraries are to be connected to the Internet.
- Many websites offer opportunities for on-line discussion between young people and advisers, between young people and each other, and among advisers across a variety of organisations.
- Telephone helplines are now a feature of many services and initiatives.
- The DfEE's own websites and the National Grid for Learning have added significantly to the resources available on-line to support young people and their advisers. The recent development of services for adults through Learndirect – comprising a helpline and a website with on-line guidance facilities – offers a useful model for Connexions to learn from.

Connexions

- Connexions is a universal service for young people aged 13-19, with a particular concern for young people who have dropped out of education, training and employment, or are at risk of doing so. It will be delivered through a variety of means, including Personal Advisers, professionals in the wider Connexions service, young people themselves and ICT.
- A Connexions website will act as a portal to information for 13-19-year-olds. It will aim to offer interactive elements such as assessment, e-guidance and career profiling.
- The website will be an integral part of the Connexions Direct pilot, to run in the North-East from early 2001. The pilot will also include a call centre, able to provide information, advice and guidance to a specified level, and to signpost users to other sources where appropriate.
- The Connexions Card will be linked to the Connexions website. It will provide access to consumer benefits so as to reward continued participation in learing.
- A Connexions CD-ROM will be issued, with a comprehensive careers and courses database.
- Technically mediated delivery will be utilised in professional development for Personal Advisers, making use of the National Grid for Learning, the Connexions website and other resources.
- These developments are linked to the Government's broad agenda for the electronic delivery of Government and other services.

KEY ISSUES ON SERVICE DELIVERY

Access

High-quality services delivered by ICT and related media are of little value if the target audience does not have *physical access* to the necessary hardware or equipment:

- People marginalised by society – the homeless, for example – may have little or no access to ICT.
- People in remote rural areas may need to travel many miles to find facilities which, in a city, are just around the corner.
- For some, the cost of access may be prohibitive even if the facility is available.

It may be necessary to offer free public access points (via Internet clubs at school, or freephone facilities at communal centres).

Barriers may be *social* as well as *geographical*:

- *Language*. To reach some groups, material must be 'translated' into minority languages (e.g. Welsh or Gujerati), use vocabulary and syntax at the target-group's level of understanding, and take account of visual/aural impairment.
- *Skills*. Users may not have the skills required to use the facilities provided (e.g. keyboard skills, Internet awareness), so either the design must take account of this (e.g. access via touchscreen as opposed to a keyboard or mouse) or training must be provided.
- *Gatekeepers*. Access may be controlled by 'gatekeepers' whose attitudes must be taken into account. Parents and carers may not be happy for young people of particular ages to view website information on sex or drugs, for example.

Other barriers may be *perceptual*. If the target-group does not see the resource as relevant, they will not use it. The 'brand image' of the service is crucial, but what attracts some will deter others.

ICT itself offers solutions to many of these access problems:

- The Internet has made it possible to communicate cheaply with other people anywhere in the world, to get information from resources world-wide without leaving the home, and to share experiences at a distance.
- The growing linkages between the television, the telephone and the Internet will greatly increase access.
- Greater utilisation of other existing technology could enhance access: e.g. translation programmes make it possible to interpret material on the Web in languages other than one's own.

▼ Engaging the users

It is important to start from where young people are:

- Following up entertaining TV or radio programmes with 'learning journeys' which could eventually end in accredited study or training.
- Building on media perceived as fashionable and attractive among the target-group, e.g. mobile phones using SMS (short message service) which can connect with e-mail and be called from a website.

More use could be made of simulations and games, widely used on computer and the Internet to provide entertainment, but not hitherto much in evidence among computer-assisted guidance software or websites.

▼ Meeting the demand

Use of ICT is at least as likely to increase as to replace demand for other services and resources. This needs to be borne in mind by policy-makers.

Provision also needs to be sustainable. Websites, for example, must be regularly updated.

▼ Targeting the service

A *differentiated service* is needed, recognising that different users use different media differently. Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that young men may use e-mail more readily than a helpline; young women, the reverse. Research into the styles and mores of the target-group is critical.

Adult intermediaries, such as parents and carers, need attention: they can activate use of the service and often have considerable influence on young people's decision-making. They may be less comfortable with technology, and less aware of its potential as a source of help.

Professionals, too, are important intermediaries. They may need support and training to use ICT effectively. Ideally, this should be made available alongside the resources offered to young

people (e.g. on the same websites) to ensure that helpers have a good working understanding of these resources, so encouraging 'shoulder-to-shoulder' relationships with ICT.

▼ Levels of service

Services need to be offered at different levels:

- For some problems, young people using a website or helpline will need only basic information and may obtain it without any direct human intervention.
- For other problems, a brief 'conversation' – by e-mail or telephone – may be needed, but may not require much specialist expertise.
- For some problems, in-depth help will be required, possibly on a continuing basis. Even defining what their issues are may be difficult for the young people concerned. An intensive face-to-face or on-line interaction with a specialist will be necessary, perhaps on an iterative basis.

These levels may also be seen as developmental stages, with support tapered in either direction, from self-help to specialist support, or the reverse as users develop greater autonomy.

A further role of Connexions is to put users in touch with one another, through e-mail, chat-rooms and on-line discussion groups. The Internet can bring together the views and experiences of people who are spatially or socially far removed from each other, and would be unlikely to meet face-to-face in real time.

▼ Involving young people

One of the eight key principles of Connexions is to take account of the views of young people as the service is developed. In designing services, use should be made of:

- Existing local and national fora.
- Focus groups.
- Regular involvement of young people in project steering groups.

In these respects it should be recognised that:

- 'Young people' are not a homogenous group.
- 'Consultation' must not appear patronising; if opinions are asked for, they should be attended to, or trust may evaporate.

ICT offers ways of obtaining feedback and enabling young people to make their views known. E-mail, on-line discussion fora, telephone surveys, automatic monitoring of the use of websites and other computer-assisted interventions, are examples. Where websites offer interactive exercises, these can be used to monitor and evaluate the extent to which the facility is in tune with its target-group and meeting their needs. In many websites, commentary, reviews, endorsements or other feedback from users now form part of the site's content. It is also increasingly possible for users to customise the interface with programmes or websites to their own tastes and circumstances.

▼ Confidentiality

The gathering of personal data on young people through ICT raises questions of confidentiality and technical security. There is a tension here between operational efficiency and individual rights to privacy.

If Connexions is to be a joined-up service, helpers will want to know who else is involved with the young person concerned, and to avoid having to collect personal information already collected elsewhere. Should they be able to access such information? For example, if a person contacts a national helpline, should information be available about who is already dealing with them at local level? The client may be using a national service for its anonymity precisely because the disclosure of their problem at local level could be embarrassing (e.g. a young woman who thinks she is pregnant).

There are also difficulties about sharing information between agencies with different ethical codes and different policies regarding security and confidentiality.

Databases should be designed around the needs of the young person, not the efficiency of management information systems. Legal and ethical requirements mean that there should be clear agreement about what information is shared and with whom, and that any referral to another service takes place only with the client's full knowledge and consent. ICT makes this more feasible: for example, three-way conferencing means that a young person calling a helpline can, with their agreement, be 'accompanied' by telephone to a second agency, and the necessary introductions made in their hearing and with their participation.

ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

▼ National v. local provision

There are choices to be made about the extent to which resources should be managed at national or local level. Some information and advice can be offered effectively through websites and helplines at national level, but some will have much more credibility if it is grounded in local knowledge. The balance and relationship between the two are crucial. Should, for example, local information be collected, collated and delivered by a national organisation, or input and maintained at a local level, within national protocols?

▼ A new building or 'in-fill'?

Rather than starting from scratch, the ICT strategy in Connexions should seek wherever possible to build on the resources that already exist. It should map and quality-assure such resources, and then fill in the gaps.

▼ Quality standards

Mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the quality of provision via ICT are vital. The Guidance Council and others have produced standards for telephone helplines and for unmediated advice and guidance at a distance. These should be mapped against each other, and a forum set up to draw together a common framework for quality in this context.

There are many different *levels* at which quality can be assessed: from the functioning of hardware and software, or the frequency with which a helpline is engaged, to the quality of content of a website and indeed of sites than can be accessed from it (the proliferation of such links can present problems).

A key component of quality is the *training* of staff, and indeed of users. General ICT skills are important, plus knowledge of the program or website being used. But given that it is difficult to control what users meet on the Web, it is important that they be equipped to discriminate between the good, the bad, and the misleading. This is an educational task, which needs attention within the curriculum of schools and colleges.

Providing a technologically mediated service imposes a discipline and focus, forcing the provider to think out clearly in advance what they are offering, and making their provision visible and *accountable*. This should make it more difficult to get away with second-rate or out-of-date provision.

▼ ICT and the Personal Adviser

Connexions demands connectedness. Whatever services are provided need to be linked, vertically and horizontally. ICT offers numerous channels for such interconnection.

There is considerable potential synergy between the role of the personal adviser and the capabilities of ICT. The fluidity of communications technology means that an adviser can conduct simultaneous and multiple conversations with clients and those to whom they need to

be referred for further help, or their parents or carers: this makes possible a spontaneity and speed of response that was impossible in the past. ICT can also enable generic Personal Advisers to access resources of knowledge and expertise outside their own specialisms. The Personal Adviser's ability to respond to a wide range of issues across the board is thereby greatly enhanced.

The roles of ICT and human interaction should be viewed not as alternatives, but as synergistic. Certainly ICT should be available on a stand-alone basis. But high-quality models of delivery are likely to involve its integration – on either a synchronous or asynchronous basis – with direct human interaction.

Particular care should be taken to avoid the notion that ICT-based services are for 'mainstream' young people, while Personal Advisers are for young people with complex or multiple problems. Connexions should provide a continuum of services, in a variety of media and methods, for all young people to access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 DfEE and Connexions Partnerships should ensure that in the design and marketing of ICT services for Connexions, *equality of opportunity* is paramount. This requires attention to access issues and to offering a differentiated service, avoiding 'one size fits all' solutions.

2 Attention is needed to *professional development* designed to raise the ICT awareness and skills of all involved in Connexions. ICT training should be a nominated priority for the training budgets and plans for the organisations involved.

3 Attention should be given to ensuring that adequate capacity can be made available to meet the *demand for additional services* likely to be generated by the use of ICT. Services should have built-in mechanisms to monitor levels of demand and evaluate effectiveness.

4 The Connexions Service should *draw on existing ICT resources*, mapping existing websites and other resources, quality-assuring them, and then filling gaps.

5 In the planning of Connexions both nationally and locally, maximum *coherence* should be sought between national/local ICT provision and the role of the Personal Adviser.

6 The organisational structure of Connexions should exploit the fluidity and interconnectedness of the Internet to encourage *information exchange* on policy developments and on developments in the pilot areas, including lateral and vertical communications and conversations between the individuals and organisations involved.

7 *Active involvement of young people* is crucial in influencing and shaping the role of ICT in Connexions. Service contracts should have explicit performance indicators to show how young people's views and contributions are being engaged.

8 *Research* should be undertaken to identity models of innovative practice – for example, in interacting on-line with young people and actively connecting them to other services – and measuring their effectiveness.

9 *Quality standards* should underpin the use of ICT in Connexions service delivery. A forum should be set up to draw together existing standards into a common framework.

10 *Quality delivery* in the use of ICT requires the identification of client needs to inform system design, plus adequate funding for hardware, maintenance and development.

11 A *reference group* to review and monitor progress in relation to the use of ICT in Connexions should be established, building on the consultation reported here.

12 An *advisory group* of representatives from media organisations such as the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV, working closely with the DfEE and Connexions Unit, should be formed to analyse how best to synergise their products and services as complementary rather than competing provision, and to explore the future potential for Connexions of digital TV.